A group of residences at Delhi

The Democracy of Durham

By FRANK M. CHASE

BETWEEN democracy and land is a peculiar relation. No human right is more fondly cherished than that of holding land. To do so is at once the symbol of the free man, and one of his primitive passions. Repress this desire to hold land, and the result is something quite different from democracy — perhaps autocracy at the one extreme, Bolshevism at the other. Thus to preserve democracy the nation must see to it that its conditions of land ownership are in good order.

Here in the United States we must face the distasteful fact that they are quite otherwise. Men on the soil are finding it more and more difficult to become home owners. Land tenancy is increasing in extent and in seriousness to the individual and nation. A class consciousness is developing among the tenants that is a thorn in the side of our boasted democracy. What is to be done about it? More to the point, what is being done about it?

Big though the problem is, and small the beginning made, California has hit upon a plan that is suggestive of great possibilities in the improvement of land-owning conditions. This is not an entirely new plan, nor a bit of the Old World transplanted in America. It is rather a cross of the two, the nature of which can be understood best by tracing the part played in its development by its originator, Dr. Elwood Mead.

Trained for engineering, Dr. Mead had held several important positions in this profession in America, when he was called to Australia in 1907 as chairman of the state rivers and water supply commission. While handling some large irrigation projects in this capacity, he came face to face with the fact that a water supply alone would not people the reclaimed land. Something needed to be done to make it possible for settlers to own and operate the land.

In search of light on this problem, he and the Australian minister of land made a study of the European systems of state aid in land purchasing, visiting Denmark, Germany, Norway, Sweden, Holland and Ireland for this purpose. During the tour two features of the systems studied particularly impressed Dr. Mead: the economies obtained through community organization, and the feeling of equality and contentment existing where all the members of a community were working more or less under state subsidy, their financial status differing little. These suggestions were borne in mind when the Australian plan for furthering land ownership was framed, the aid of the commonwealth being extended by communities instead of by scattered individuals.

Doctor Mead spent seven years in Australia. During this time he had an active part in establishing twenty-two state-aided settlements, the largest comprising 85,000 acres.

On his return to the United States in 1914, to become professor of rural institutions in the University of California, which position he still holds, Doctor Mead found the land-holding conditions of that state in serious disorder. Land promoters and speculators had plied their trade to such an extent that the state was burdened with farmers trying to operate with insufficient capital or, having failed in that, were being forced into renting under very adverse circumstances. To this situation the land barons added further complications by hanging tenaciously on to their huge holdings. A serious shortage of skilled labor also existed; this being due in no little part to the influx of Asiatics, who, with their encroachment upon the American laborer's place and their tendency toward racial grouping, were menacing the rural life of California.

Besides Dr. Mead, one other Californian was interested in bettering these conditions. This was Hiram W. Johnson, then governor. At a conference called to consider what action should be taken, Dr. Mead proposed the plan that he had helped to work out in Australia. It had brought good results there, and he believed it could be adapted to the Golden State's needs. His suggestion was approved. However, the conferees thought that the people were scarcely ready for a move so radical. Consequently it was decided to give the existing evils a thorough airing, and Dr. Mead was put at the head of the investigating committee. How necessary were remedial measures was summed up in one sentence of the committee's report: "We have not found a single settler, who, bringing with him only the limited capital accepted by state systems of other countries, has been able to pay for his land in the time agreed upon by his contract."

Doctor Mead embodied his remedy for the situation in a bill, which, passing the legislature in 1917, appropriated $260,000 for establishing the first settlement. To administer this fund the act also created the State Land Settlement Board, of which he became chairman.

Setting to work immediately, the board early in 1918 acquired by contract 6,219 acres at Durham, in the Sacramento Valley. In May of the same year the first allotments were opened to settlers. But the men obtaining land in this tract were not simply assigned to a few acres on which they might "sink or swim"; California had seen enough of such tactics under private colonization. The state had gone into the land business for purposes far different from making money. The preservation of rural democracy was involved, and it was to the state's interest, financially and otherwise, to see that the men it was staking had a chance to make good.

Accordingly an important and significant part of the board's work was performed before the arrival of the first settler. Formerly a ranch that had been farmed haphazardly by tenants and hired hands, much of it being rough and unimproved, the land in the raw tract at Durham would have offered the small operator little hope of a living. An irrigation system was therefore established, this including all but 700 acres of the tract, drainage supplied where needed, and the land divided into farms. The land also was leveled and much of it sown to alfalfa and grain. So that when even the first settlers arrived they found not only well-developed farm land but productive labor immediately before them; they thus became self-sustaining from the start.

In the laying out of the farms, the board's concern for the settlers again was well demonstrated. Before a division line was established, farm management and soil specialists carefully went over the tract, determining the size of each farm according to its topography, the nature of its soil, and the type of farming for which it was best fitted. Thus on soils suitable to intensive cultivation the farms were made small, the most of them on irrigated land consisting of from twenty to forty acres. But where the soil was better adapted to grain raising the units were larger, there being a number of 160-acre places. The farms were arranged, too, with an eye to providing good building sites with pleasant surroundings. Virtually every settler at Durham, for instance, has been able to build his house in the shade of one or more of the large oaks with which the tract was dotted when opened up for settlement.

The terms by which the settlers obtained this land were made easy and attractive—so attractive, in fact, that five applications were received for every available farm. This enabled the board to sift the applicants carefully and so choose men of decided credit to the community. The selections were made on the basis of the applicant's answers to a questionnaire, designed to show whether he was worthy of the state's assistance, supplemented by a personal interview with members of the board or their representative.

On purchasing a farm the settler paid but five per cent of its cost, his contract of sale permitting him to pay the balance in forty semi-annual installments, with interest on the deferred payments at five per cent. Put a little differently, the plan simply called for paying the interest, at a low rate, and three per cent of the principal a year. After five years from the first payment, however, the settler may, if he chooses, pay off any amount of the principal, or all of it, whereupon he would receive the deed to his property.

The state further assisted the settler by lending him, if necessary, up to 60 per cent of the cost, but not to exceed $3,000, of his house and barn and other permanent improvements, allowing him twenty years in which to remove this indebtedness. It also advanced funds for the purchase of live stock and equipment, such loans to be repaid in five years.

From the foregoing it is seen that the minimum capital necessary was enough to make the initial payment of five per cent of the cost of the land and 40 per cent of the cost of building a house and barn. For this reason the board required that the purchaser of a farm at Durham possess at least $1,500 in money or working equipment. At the other extreme the board accepted no applicant owning agricultural land the value of which, including the land applied for at Durham, was more than $15,000; no limit, however, being put on the amount of money possessed.

Other requirements of the settler were that he begin actual residence upon his land within six months of the approval of his application, that he cultivate his land to the satisfaction of the board, that he continue to live on it for at least eight months of each of ten consecutive years, and that he not sell or assign it without the consent of the board; these restrictions effectively shutting out the land speculator and safeguarding the liberal opportunity of the worker of small means.

Perhaps the most significant phase of the Durham plan is its provision for farm laborers. The 60-year-old carpenter and his wife who came to the settlement soon after it opened concretely illustrate the meaning of this. On their arrival they had just enough money to make the initial payment of $20 on one of the twenty-six small tracts that the board had set aside for the hired men. Both the man and his wife went to work. The carpenter earned $6 a day helping the other settlers erect their houses and barns, while his wife found employment in their neighbors' homes and gardens. Mornings and evenings he built their own home. By November, they were living in a bungalow on their little place on which they owed just $6; while the next year this old couple, with a new hold on life, saved a thousand dollars.

Durham thus provides the opportunity whereby the penniless hired man may not only acquire a home, but graduate into farm ownership in a few years. And this is precisely what the State Land Settlement Board expects of the more thrifty and industrious. The laborers' homes are purchased on the same long-time terms as the farms, the pay-

(Concluded on page 14)

Above—The farm laborer is a home owner and an integral part of the community at Durham.
Below—The home of a Durham farmer, whose good home with pleasant surroundings, is a part of California's liberal plan of land settlement.